

**THE CHINESE PEOPLE'S
LIBERATION ARMY: "SHORT
ARMS AND SLOW LEGS"**

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this twenty-eighth volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). As we did earlier this year with our publication of two companion papers on NATO, we now offer two complementary studies that address Chinese security developments and US-Chinese relations into the first part of the 21st Century. This study, Russ Howard's Occasional Paper 28, *The Chinese People's Liberation Army: "Short Arms and Slow Legs,"* examines the military side of the Chinese equation. COL Howard analyzes Chinese military capabilities and intentions through the lens of China's military spending and its military doctrine, with particular focus on the constraints China faces in attempting to fulfill the intent implied through its doctrine. He concludes that at least in the short- to mid-term, the PLA will fall short of meeting its doctrinal promise, allowing it to become a stronger regional power, but preventing its emergence as a global military peer competitor to the United States. In the companion Occasional Paper 29, LTC (P) Neal Anderson's *Overcoming Uncertainty: U.S.-China Strategic Relations in the 21st Century*, the focus shifts to the diplomatic and economic dimensions of the Chinese equation. Together the two studies, written by two very bright and able United States Army officers, offer valuable insights into a rising regional power with whom the United States must interact in shaping a secure and stable East Asia.

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JAMES M. SMITH
Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China's rise in power has focused considerable scrutiny on the capabilities and intentions of the People's Liberation Army (PLA). For some observers, Beijing's combination of consistently rising budgets, military modernization, and a more offensive operational doctrine has signaled its intention to assume the status of a world power. While every major power's defense budget and military personnel levels have declined substantially since the Berlin Wall came down, the Chinese budget has increased on average approximately 11% per year. In addition, China's new military doctrine "Limited war under high-technological conditions" is more assertive, stressing offensive, even preemptive, uses of military power.

This paper examines the PLA's intentions and its ability to threaten its neighbors by considering two variables: China's defense budget and its military doctrine. Defense budgets are only marginal indicators of intentions, but they offer insights into what kinds of capabilities a military is purchasing and developing. Military doctrine is an excellent source of intent because it provides a state's war preparations guidance, which defines the nature and origin of how it perceives future wars and how the military should prepare to fight those wars.

Conceptually, the PLA's new doctrine is suited to achieving Beijing's objectives. However, the PLA does not have, nor has it ever had, the wherewithal to carry out the doctrine's intent. China's deficiencies in systems integration, manufacturing propulsion systems, and advanced computer technologies will be the most limiting factors in the PLA's ability to field the weapons and equipment necessary to satisfy strategic requirements.

China's navy has only limited power-projection capability, given the absence of aircraft carriers, and it lacks any real ability to deal with the power projected by the carrier-centered battle groups maintained by the US. China's air force is a collection of old, outdated fighters and bombers. China has never been able to produce an indigenous fighter or bomber, and joint production efforts with other countries have not been fruitful. The weakness of China's airlift capability and the inability by the PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) to provide air cover for ships at sea also remain hindrances to mobility and power projection. The Chinese army is an oversized, infantry-heavy force that cannot get to where it needs to go, when it needs to get there, and do what it is supposed to do. All the Chinese services have difficulty working together and derive no synergy from conducting combined arms operations.

China has taken some positive steps toward force modernization. Reducing the Chinese military by one million personnel will do much to streamline the bloated force and be a positive sign to the world public. Devoting increased funding and emphasis to "pockets of excellence" will enable the Chinese military to address contingencies against regional adversaries.

However, Chinese military capabilities have never been adequate to satisfy the leadership's doctrinal intentions. China will not be able to leapfrog the US or other major powers' capabilities by employing asymmetrical weapons against the West. China's lack of computer and systems integration sophistication and other technological shortcomings will continue to hinder its military's ability to take advantage of the new "revolution in military affairs (RMA)"-type technology well into the future. The PLA's arms may get longer, and its legs faster, but it will take a long, long time before China's military rivals the world's only superpower's.

